

Sir William Johnson House (Fort Johnson)  
Northwest corner of intersection of  
State Routes 5 and 67  
Fort Johnson  
Montgomery County  
New York

HABS No. NY-391

HABS  
NY,  
29-FORJO,  
1-

An Addendum to  
Fort Johnson  
Amsterdam, New York  
in HABS Catalog (1941)

FORMERLY  
NY  
29-AM  
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

HABS  
NY,  
29-FORT JO,  
1-

FORT JOHNSON  
Amsterdam vicinity, Montgomery County, New York

Owner: Montgomery County Historical Society

Date of erection: 1749 (?)

Present condition: Good

Builder: Sir William Johnson

Additional data:

The above date seems to be somewhat in question, as several historians give different dates. One gives 1742, another 1743, but Greene's The Old Mohawk Turnpike states there was first a wooden building and later this stone building of 1749. This date seems preferable, as Reid, on page 128 of his The Mohawk Valley, states, "The first covering to the roof of Fort Johnson was probably shingles, as Johnson did not order the lead covering, which was purchased in London, until the year 1749." Then on page 150 he states, "The roof was formerly covered with sheet lead, which will account for the heavy timber used in its construction." So we rather agree with the historian, Greene, that this first building in 1742 or 1743 was of frame construction. This lead covering was removed during the Revolution to be used for bullets. It is now a slate roof.

When the building was constructed, about one-third of the cellar was devoted to the kitchen and separated from it by a thick wall, making a room of about 20 by 30 feet. On the east side was a massive brick oven and fireplace, used for cooking. The floor of the kitchen was covered with stone slabs, and the room was lighted by the door and two small windows about 20 inches high. The four large chimneys are supported by arches about 5 feet high, 4 feet wide, and 4 feet deep. These arches were closed by massive wooden doors and used for various purposes. A narrow room about 30 feet long and 15 feet wide was cut off for a dining room for the servants. The descent into the cellar was made by a steep, winding stair, but not used often in all probability, as the kitchen was entered from the outside.

This place was at first called "Mount Johnson," but when the place was threatened by the French in 1755 it was fortified, and in 1756 named "Fort Johnson." Upon entering

you find a hall of grand proportions, being 35 feet long, 15 feet wide, and about 10 feet high, with paneled walls and broad open stairway with plain mahogany baluster and rail leading to the lofty attic. The large room on the west side of the hall, with its lofty, paneled walls and broad, deep windows was undoubtedly built for Sir William's reception room. Opposite this room is another of nearly the same size but with the appearance of having been designed for a parlor. Behind these two rooms are two long, narrow rooms.

The rooms and hall on the second floor correspond with those below, except that the paneling is confined to one end of the room and forms closets on each side of the wide and deep chimney. In the southeast room is found a quaint addition to the fireplace, a primitive cast-iron heating apparatus which is practically an open iron fireplace and bears on its face these words:

"Ross and Birds Hibernian Furnace 1783"

The two long and narrow rooms are in the rear, with bare, white, plaster walls and low, dark wainscoting of cherry birch. The windows are broad and deep, the sash with small panes of glass, and with inside shutters of cherry birch.

There is a large attic with massive timbers, two rows of dormer windows, and lofty peak, floor boards from 12 to 15 inches wide, and wrought hand-made nails.

References:

- Dieffendorf, Mary Riggs, The Historic Mohawk, p. 131  
Reid, The Mohawk Valley, pp. 114, 128, 142, 145, 146, 149 and 150  
Greene, The Old Mohawk Turnpike, pp. 86, 88, 492, particularly the latter as to date of erection of Fort Johnson.

Addendum to:

Sir William Johnson House(Fort Johnson)

Northwest corner of intersection of  
state routes 5 and 67

Fort Johnson,

Montgomery County

New York

HABS NY-391

HABS

NY

29-10-50

1-

WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

## SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON HOUSE (FORT JOHNSON)

An Addendum to  
Fort Johnson  
Amsterdam, New York  
in HABS Catalog (1941)

HABS  
NY,  
29-FOR30,  
1-

Location: Northwest corner of intersection of State Routes  
5 and 67, Fort Johnson, Montgomery County, New York

Present Owner  
and Occupant: Montgomery County Historical Society

Present Use: Museum

Brief Statement  
of Significance: This house was built in 1749 for Sir William Johnson,  
wealthy land owner and Indian Agent in New York for  
the English government in the mid-nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Owned and occupied by Sir William Johnson, 1749-1763. Willed to his son, Sir John Johnson, who occupied it until 1774. Confiscated by the Tryon County Commission of Sequestration in 1777. After passing through many hands, it was bought and presented to the present owners by Brigadier-General John Watts DePeyster, a descendant of Major Stephen Watts, a brother-in-law of Sir John Johnson.
2. Date of erection: 1749.

- B. Historical Events Connected with Structure: The following is extracted from "The Colonial Mansion of Sir William Johnson and His Son Sir John Johnson, Fort Johnson, New York," a booklet available at the house:

"William Johnson, born in Ireland in 1715, came to America in 1738 when but a lad of 23 years old to manage an estate of some several thousand acres that had come into the possession of his uncle, Admiral Peter Warren of the Royal Navy. This land lay along the south bank of the Mohawk in the town of Florida [New York], opposite the present Amsterdam. Here he made his first home at what was called Warren's Bush or Johnson's Settlement. Sir Peter Warren was a brother-in-law of Oliver De Lancy, an important man of his time, and it was largely through his aid that Admiral Peter came into possession of this enormous grant of some 16,000 acres.

".... Honest and fair dealings won him the immediate friendship of all with whom he had transactions and especially so with the Indians, who were so often the victims of crafty traders. The Mohawks said of him after long acquaintance: 'He never deceived us.' He was most democratic in his manner of living. This side of his nature perhaps paid him bigger dividends in the way of material gain than any other trait he possessed.

".... He was continually receiving supplies from the Governor to be used as gifts to the Indians, to 'keep the peace chain bright,' for he was soon appointed Superintendent in charge of Indian affairs for the Crown.

"He lived at Warren's Bush some five years and succeeded in disposing of about two thirds of his uncle's land. About 1740 he bought a large tract of land himself, on the north side of the river - extending westerly from present Amsterdam.

"Johnson's first 'wife' was a young German immigrant named Catherine Weisenberg, a Palatine orphan .... Her first two children, John (later Sir John), and Anne (commonly called Nancy and later Col. Claus' wife) were born on the south side of the river. Nothing remains of this house and little or nothing is known of the manner of its construction though the site is marked. Mary, the second daughter, became the wife of her cousin, Guy Johnson.

"Mount Johnson, Sir William's first house north of the river, was on his own property. It was a stone house, built about 1742, and stood a mile east of the present Fort Johnson, which he built in 1749 on the west bank of that tumbling little stream, Kayderosseras Creek.

"Catherine Weisenbert died at Fort Johnson about 1749 and was buried in the garden, so the legend goes.... Of all Sir William's children by his several wives, hers were of greatest prominence in later life, yet she knew them only as infants.

"Caroline Hendrick, a daughter of the Mohawk Chief Abraham and a niece of King Hendrick, was Sir William's next choice to share his home. She bore him three children and died about 1752.

"His third 'wife' was Molly Brant, daughter of the widow Brant by a former husband. Both Molly and her famous brother, Joseph, were children of their mother's first marriage to a full-blooded Mohawk Chief of the Wolf tribe, and were grandchildren of one of the Mohawk chieftains taken to the Court of London in 1710 by Colonel Schuyler of Albany. Molly, 'Misa Molly' or the 'Brown Lady Johnson' as she is known to history, came to Fort Johnson about 1753. She bore Sir William eight children who survived and are mentioned in Sir William's will....

"Colonel William Johnson became 'Sir William' following the victorious Battle of Lake George in 1755, in recognition of his distinguished services. In this same year, at a congress of governors at Alexandria, General Braddock urged and secured the appointment of Colonel William

Johnson as Superintendent of Indian affairs. Braddock immediately advanced Johnson £2,000 to pursue the work. Johnson was in attendance at the meeting. To live in a style befitting a titled gentleman, he built Johnson Hall at Johnstown in 1762 and here he died [July 11, 1774].

"Sir William was public-spirited, open-handed and co-operative in promoting any worthy project, and in his official capacity was an outstanding success, particularly so in his commanding influence over the Indians. As a military leader he was successful at the Battle of Lake George, at the capture of Fort Niagara, and again at the capture of Montreal.

"With masterly strategy and diplomacy Sir William brought about peace with Pontiac at Oswego, averting what would have been a far-flung Indian uprising with its fearful consequences to the English. This peace treaty is the highlight of his control over the Indians."

- C. Source of information: "The Colonial Mansion of Sir William Johnson and His Son Sir John Johnson, Fort Johnson, New York," a booklet available at the house.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect  
National Park Service  
June 1962

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A handsome Mohawk Valley Residence that is notable because of its proportions and triangularly disposed front dormer.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

### B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 59'-9" x 32'-1" rectangular structure, two-and-a-half stories, main facade faces south.
2. Foundations: Similar to walls.
3. Wall construction: Rough-cut limestone, light grey and rust colors.
4. Porches, bulkheads: Discrepancies in the porch, columns out of line.
5. Chimneys: Four brick chimneys (one on east and west ends, two on rear).

N.Y.  
29 FOR 30  
1-

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Doors are apparently later.
- b. Windows and shutters: Window and shutter hardware apparently original.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Slate-covered hipped roof.
- b. Cornice: Simple period cornice.
- c. Dormers: Three triangularly disposed dormers on south slope of roof; one dormer on east and west slopes. Apparently original.

C. Technical Description of Interiors:

- 1. Floor plans: Central-hall plan with two large front rooms and two narrow rear rooms. Second floor similar.
- 2. Stairways: New stair treads and balusters.
- 3. Flooring: Wide, random-width boards in less important rooms, narrower boards in principal rooms.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, painted or papered. Parlor and bedroom above have raised paneling.
- 5. Doorways and doors: Six- and eight-panel, raised-panel doors. Molded, mitered trim on doorways. Double architrave on principal doors.
- 6. Trim: Raised-panel wainscoting in central hall.
- 7. Hardware: Butt hinges, mortise locks, brass knobs.
- 8. Lighting: Candles.
- 9. Heating: Central hot air.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting and orientation: Faces south on medium-sized level lot. Highway at front.
- 2. Outbuildings: Originally a large group of barns, mills, and outbuildings. Only two buildings survive: a one-story stone mill, which burned and was rebuilt later as a house; and a small wooden privy.